

[James Bolivar Billingsley]

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Interview with James Bolivar Billingsley, White Pioneer, Marlin, Texas.

“My father, James Bolivar Billingsley, was a son of Hezekiah Billingsley, and was born in Hinds County, Mississippi, March 27th, 1828. My grandfather, Hezekiah Billingsley, was a descendent of Scotch ancestry, who emigrated to Union County, North Carolina in the year 1755. My grandmother, Jerush Lang, was the daughter of William Lang, of Chesterfield district, South Carolina, who was one of the bold riders in Captain Francis Marions' famous cavalry command in the Revolutionary War.

“Grandmother was the sister of Willis, Stephen and William A. Lang of Wayne County, Mississippi, and lived for several years with the family of General illiam A. Lang, finally settling in the city of Jackson, Hinds County, where grandfather Billingsley died in 1842. He left two children, a daughter, Caroline, who was married to Samuel Cole and who

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moved to Cass County, Texas, and a son James Boliver, my father, who was thirteen years of age at the time of grandfathers death.

“Soon after the death of grandfather Billingsley, my uncle General William A. Lang moved my mother and my father to his house in Wayne County, where they became members of the family. My father was treated as a son and my uncle William gave him the same consideration as his own children. To my uncle and his wife my father and my grandmother was indebted for a home and all the care and kindness that could be showered upon them. My grandmother Billingsley died in 1847. 2 “My father was sent to the common schools of the county and then placed in Montrose Academy, under the Rev. John N. Waddle, where he remained until the death of his mother. At that time there were private finishing schools in the state, it was the custom for young men and women to attend these schools. His preference was for the industrial pursuits.

“In 1849, General Lang died but father still remained in the family, and in 1850, his uncle John Bolles Billingsley died, leaving him an estate of about 5,000. With this sum and such contributions as were made to him by his cousins, the Langs, he commenced business as a farmer. In November, of 1850, he was united in marriage to Miss Virginia C. Shaw, daughter of Judge [?]. [?]. Shaw and his wife [maryllis?] Shaw, of [eyne?] County, Mississippi. To them were born six children, I was the only one who lived to mature years.

“At the battle of Val Verde during the War between the states, father's cousin, Captain Willis Lang, who had raised a company at Marlin, and was mortally wounded at this battle, left the Brazos bottom plantation to my father, in a will he made before he left to enter the Confederate service. And in November of 1865 my father moved from Mississippi to Falls County Texas where he took possession of this estate. His success as a farmer was complete. At one time it was said of him that he was the largest tax-payer in Falls County. The tribute paid by his friends was all any one could desire. After his death my mother moved to Waco where we lived for a few years and later moved to Marlin and lived until

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her death in 1922. She was buried in the family cemetery near the town of Perry, where my father and the children lie.

“Captain Willis Lang who bequeathed his estate to my father, who was his cousin and whose relationship were as brothers, was born November 29th, in 1839. He was the son of General William Lang, who was a native of 3 South Carolina. They were parents of five children, Clement D. Albine, who was married to Willis L. Horne, in 1847; Jerusha E., who was married to Thomas [?]. Falconer; William and Willis.

“The family moved from South Carolina in 1817, locating near Winchester in Wayne County, Mississippi. On their way to Mississippi they passed through the Creek Indian nation who were in hostility to the whites at that time. After many narrow escapes they reached their destination and settled on a plantation as farmers. They were owners of slaves and the plantation was a typical one of the Old South. Captain Willis was reared at home, receiving his preliminary education at the plantation school. When he reached sufficient age he was sent to Oxford, where he was graduated with honors. He lived about home for a time, then entered the law office of his brother-in-law, Mr. Falconer, of Alabama and began reading law.

“After the death of his father he returned home and gave his attention to raising cotton on the home plantation. This he continued for two years but without success on, account of the proper rainfall. He decided to try a new country and with seventy-five slaves he started for Texas and located in Falls County in the Brazos bottom, twelve miles from the town of Marlin, he brought a complete out-fit for opening up a new plantation, mechanics, farming implements, teams etc. He was successful in his operations, and lived in prosperity, with occasional scouting trips, such as when he joined a company of rangers in 1860, at Waco, Texas, under Captain I. M. Smith, answering a call of Governor Houston to pursue, repel and punish the Indians marauding upon the frontier of Texas.” 4 “When the war between the states came on he raised a company known as Company B. Fifth Texas Cavalry, Army of the Confederate States of America. Before taking part in the war he made his will and

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gave my father the Brazos bottom plantation and to Miss Ida Anders, a daughter of James Anders, twenty thousand dollars. She later married L. B. Chilton, now deceased. Capt. Lang never married.

“General William A. Lang, the father of Captain Willis, was a native of Wales and emigrated to the United States at an early day and some of the descendants are still living in South Carolina and Mississippi.

“The wife of James Bolivar Billingsley was Maude Sparks from Johnson County and James Bolivar Billinseley had one son, J. Allen Billingsley born at Marlin, Texas, January 29, 1909, and he still lives at Marlin. The mother of James Bolivar Billingsley moved from her home in Waco to Marlin in 1901. She died in 1922. James Bolivar Billingsley, wife and son are all that are left of the Billingsley family.

“As a child I can remember our life on the plantation in the Barzos bottom. It was a wonderful hunting ground and the Harrison family, the Rose family, Dunklins, Mullins, and the Oakes families, each had their plantation homes, we had our little community schools and church, I can remember well the brush arbor meetings, as we called them, in the summer, how the people up and down the river came from far and near and would camp for the whole time of the protracted meetings. There was old brother [Correll?], deceased, one of the first Baptist ministers in this section of the country who often preached for us and later Dr. B. H. Carroll, deceased, who would come from Waco to help in these meetings. 5 “I have often heard my father tell of how the country was so thinly settled when Captain Lang came to the Brazos bottom long before the war between the states. The nearest trading post was the old Torrey Brothers store farther up on the Tehuscana Creek. This was later owned and operated by George Bernard and called Bernards Store. Waco was just a little village and it was many years before the first railroad was built into Waco. This was the Houston and Texas Central and was built in just a few miles of the plantation in 1870, I believe. After the railroad was built through the country, the nearest post office for many years was Perry. This was before the town of [Riesel?] was located.

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The stock men and plantation owners shipped their stock and cotton by rail from Waco and Marlin after this railroad was built.

“Another old landmark that I have heard my father speak of, was old Fort Griffin, this fort was established two years after he came to Texas. It was situated on one of the trails over which provision trains and the cattle drives were made. At one time as many as six thousand federal troops were stationed here. It grew into a town of two or three thousand people, and almost every type of business flourished. Saloons where the cowboys stopped on their way up the trails for a drink and to gamble their stake at poker, hunters who were passing through on their way to market with their supply of hides and their stories of the close calls with the Indians. The parade grounds overlooking the clear fork of the Brazos River, the buildings used as a jail and stores, now lie in decay and ruins—a place shut in by big ranches, and just ten miles away, the oil fields. 6 “On the site of the old fort rows of stones outline what was once the hospital and men's quarters. The walls of the adjutants buildings stand roofless against the sky. Over the hill is the old powder magazine hidden from view by a clump of trees, and beyond it is the cemetery. Buried in this cemetery are many of the early citizens who died with their boots on, an was the fashion of t ose days. T e Masonic Lodge building which was constructed in 1867; the old calaboose, and a store building are about all that is left. The Masonic Lodge building now houses a school. Only the rocks and tress still stand as silent sentinels of the past.

“Times were pretty hard at the end of the war between the states, acc rding to my fathers old day book. There was no salt to be had in Texas scarcely and the old smoke houses yielded up its treasure of this article from its dirt floor. The cooking utensils were iron pots and gourds, water buckets were of buckskin, and terrapin shells were used for glesses. Gourd fiddles took the place of the modern radio during the days before the war, so Captain Lang wrote to my father on the conditions in Texas. He recalled to dance he attended when a misunderstanding about who was to pay the fiddler resulted in the old tune making gourd being smashed. They danced the rest of the night to the tune of music made with tin pans. Distance was no object then even though they did not have any

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automobiles, when there was to be anything to attend their Texas mustangs were all they needed to get them where they wanted to go.

“The old Waco Marlin road ran near our house on the Brazos bottom place. The old stage passed our house on its way from Waco to Marlin, and robberies were not uncommon. The robbers had an easy way to make their get-away in the river bottom. Our family could often hear the baying of the blood-hounds ⁷ as the officers were following them in the hunt for escaped bandits, or prisoners. The fact that there were few banks in the country accounted for the people carrying their money with them on their travels.

“The road no longer goes by the old home, but passes farther east, to the new [?] Marlin highway. Where the old road passed on to the land of many a traveller's dreams as they sought a new home, the new highway with its flat cars as they speed to their destination. These travellers find no time for the dreams those others found such pleasure in. And the old house sits quietly with its memories as it possibly thinks of the families it has sheltered and the travellers for whom it has furnished warmth and food.”